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R. Meltzer, one of the nation's most colorful and respected rock critics, has formed his own punk band: Vom (as in vomit). The group will play the Whisky Wednesday and Thursday nights, then makes its out-of-town debut April 8-9 at San Francisco's Mabuhay Gardens. In 1967, Meltzer was kicked out of the graduate program at Yale because too many of his philosophy papers dealt with rock 'n' roll. Since then, he has had two books on rock published and has written for Rolling Stone, the Village Voice and Creem. Meltzer has also written lyrics for several Blue Oyster Cult songs.

● A "critics' band"? "Frustrated musicians"? It's true that Gregg Turner, Gene Sculatti and I—founding triumvirate of the hot beat aggregation known as Vom—are rock writers, but one thing none of us has ever been is a passive armchair critperson. We've got the *passion* and spirit of *fun* and all that stuff.

The main instigation towards our taking the performer plunge was that the punk/new wave explosion has led to a renaissance of archetypal rock values that once seemed doomed to ancient history. One glimpse of the Weasels at the Whisky and the Weirdos at Myron's Ballroom and the if-they-can-do-it-we-can-do-it syndrome overtook us.

Finally there was a scene in which anyone could walk off the street and onto a stage! The only prerequisite: willingness to make a total fool of oneself! Rock 'n' roll as it was meant to be! Back to basics!

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The new wave's concentration on patent stupidness — or, more properly, "stoopidness"—seemed the crux of the matter. We decided right off to put together not just a punk combo but *the* punk combo. Overkill became our goal. Before we even knew who'd be playing what, we were churning out reams of unabashedly offensive lyrics: "Too Animalistic," "I'm in Love With Your Mom," "Broads Are Equal," "I Live With the Roaches" and others too sordid to mention.

Fortunately, competent musicians were soon to arrive! Lisa Brennies (formerly of the Motels), Dave Guzman (late of Black Glove), Phil Koehn (of the everpopular Gerhardt Gesell), and Metal Mike Saunders (of various Arkansas bar bands and a former rock critic himself), who offered their services on bass, two guitars, and drums, respectively. Turner took over backup vocals. Sculatti opted for a consultant's role.

Meanwhile, the trappings necessary for a stage persona had to be assembled. This being punk and not old-fashioned, Deep Purple heavy metal, stoopid garb and inane antics had to be as important to the proceedings as, say, purely *musical considerations*. So a corduroy jacket left over from college was quickly mutilated and desecrated with slogans like "Butcher," "Disgust," and "Vom wants your mom." It became the basic outer layer upon which I could pin such accoutrements as rusted hinges and souvenir San Francisco ashtrays.

For comfort I slashed the sides of a pair of too-light $2.98 white loafers. I got my hair cut (short). I got my ear pierced (left), only to learn that it would be some time before I'd be able to wear a safety pin—or, for that matter, anything not made of gold or silver (nature can be cruel). I began a collection of live cockroaches from my apartment, to be released while performing, maybe even on my face and arms (proof of "commitment" if there ever was one).

All just a pose? A bit calculated? Sure. But so what. Don't you think Mick Jagger and Elvis were calculated? A crassly primitive, functionally flawed "intellectualism"—irony of ironies—pervades the punk scene from New York to Frisco.

Vom's R. Meltzer, critic and purveyor of "reams of unabashedly offensive lyrics."
Times photo by Marianna Diamos

Pop Music

Back to Rock Basics: Offensive Stoopidity

BY R. MELTZER

The Weirdos went to CalArts. Talking Heads are from the Rhode Island School of Design. Name me a new-wave outfit that isn't in reality a pack of "frustrated critics" given a new lease on life by their sudden easy access to the world of ideas. (Only the Ramones come to mind, and their excuse is that they're—one guesses—*genuinely stupid*, with a U, in fact—blessed by nature to the nth degree!)

If this all sounds a bit like that friendly old bugaboo known as Dada, such an impression would not really be far off the mark. A frustrated artist myself perhaps, I've always liked Dada, and critics of my own writing used to pejoratively refer to it as "Dada criticism." So it has been an exciting turn of events to witness Dada's final fusion with the pop void. An arty prop originally of use to only a handful of European high-culture cynics inexorably has become the automatic gesture for an army of unaffectedly ordinary nerds. The germplasm could of course be easily traced from Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol to Lou Reed to Iggy Pop to etc. In any event, we are at last privy to Dada in Context, something utterly inconceivable even during the cosmic scattergun '60s. Given the actual hokey parameters of the current scene, an even more significant conceptual nexus has been reached: Dada is now and forever nada, and vice versa.

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The biggest initial obstacle I encountered was convincing the band's bona-fide-certified musicians of my "serious intent" as a singer. I worked long hours at when to come in on a song (try it some time) and getting my throat in shape. Inevitably, I was undeniably perverted by purely musical concerns. I was now a "musician," and I was ready to wail. The subarticulate emotionalism of rock 'n' roll that I'd always felt beholden to from the other side of the microphone was finally within my grasp.

"Peptalks" with my partners became necessary in light of the slowness of the project. For the sake of staying power and a punk-powerful first public impression, we opted for tightness. We had a chance to play with the Nuns at the Whisky in December, but a couple of string players insisted we weren't ready!

A pair of dates finally transpired. First time out, we did a short set at Rhino Records in Westwood, with drums unfortunately forbidden (too much noise for the French restaurant next door). The response ranged from "Spastic dorks" to "Already more interesting than two-thirds of the bands in L.A." Next stop was our "professional" debut (we made $14.50, total) at Kahuna's Bearded Clam on the Redondo Beach Pier, playing opposite some legitimate local competition in the form of the Tremors and Shock.

The evening started pretty slowly, with both bands eliciting moderate applause and an even more moderate amount of pogoing. We expected little more ourselves—seemed like a dead club—but as soon as we began our first number all hell broke loose. Beer bottles came flying, followed by spit, punches, melted wax, tables and chairs. The intensity of the onslaught may have been triggered by the stack of genuine garbage our roadies had dumped onstage before showtime, the maneuver being interpreted as an open invitation to whatever (hey, it worked!).

By the second song, I was already getting shocks from my mike on account of all the beer. Soon thereafter Turner was wrestled off the three-foot stage by an overzealous female, suffering minor cuts from the omnipresent broken glass. Midway through the set, I decided to let these jokers have it. I'd intended to empty the box of live crickets I'd brought along down my shirt, but instead heaved the insects audienceward, momentarily moving everybody back a good 20 feet.

My only self-directed act was to pour a can of STP on my head during "Punkmobile," and that succeeded in clogging up one of the PA connections, as well as losing me a contact lens when I found the need to rub the vile stuff out of my eye.

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They ate us up. Praises galore and numerous requests for Vom T-shirts. Management made us sweep the place up, but we'd *arrived*. The only problem I see in the aftermath of such total artistic success is we're actually a damn sight better than not-half-bad. But "quality" will not deter us—even positiveness per se can be regarded as a viable subject matter, at the very least—and we're more than willing to take the responsibility of playing the Stones to the Sex Pistols' Beatles. No sweat. ●

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